



CFC Partner: Superior Court of California
Placer County: High Conflict STEP Calendar (Family Law Court)

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Total number of children prenatal to five served: 23

Total number of family members of children prenatal to 5 served: 77

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

The STEP Program was refunded by going to a commission meeting and putting on our display and talking to each commissioner and explaining what our program is doing and how it is positively effecting children. Our program went from zero families to having a total of 133 participants enter the STEP Program. Each family is screened using the Placer County Outcome Screen forms.

These families receive a case manager, therapy assessments, home visits, supervised exchanges, conflict resolution classes and scheduled court appearances where they are given a court ordered parenting plan in the best interest of the child and then monitored for compliance. The STEP program has achieved the goals of less litigation over the same problems around custody and visitation, getting the parents centered on their children and not themselves, assessing the families for mental health issues, substance abuse problems and issues that are causing conflict and harm to their children.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS:

Each family in the STEP Program is given a specific court order around custody and visitation and monitored by the case manager who is an experienced master's level social worker. The case manager, using the Placer County Outcome Screens and a self-assessment form, assesses the families for problems and therapeutic needs. Constant litigation and false allegations by the parents are reduced because the case manager is able to run interference with the parents and investigate allegations to determine truth from fiction and provide the Court with legitimate information to base important family decisions. These families are referred by the Family Law Judicial Officers as being at such a high level of conflict that it is causing emotional harm to the children.

The Court identifies the families that are constantly coming back to Court in order to change custody or due to one parent or the other defying court orders. It also refers those families where the parents are using the children against each other or making allegations that need to be investigated. Each family has scheduled court appearances, in front of the same Judge each time, where they must provide the case manager with their list of issues prior to the hearing. These issues are mediated beforehand and resolved if possible. If a resolution is not found, both parents and the Judge are given a copy of the issues so the Court's time can be used to benefit the families by making informed decisions. This intervention reduces the conflict between the parents and in turn decreases the emotional abuse suffered by the children.

Most children are assessed for therapy and between 12 and 24 sessions are authorized per child. If necessary the parents are brought in during a few family sessions to help the child voice their concerns and feelings about their parents divorce, custody and visitation. On occasion a parent is also referred to therapy. These children have been torn by being put in the

middle and have all kinds of emotional problems like self-hate, false information, too much court information, forced by one parent or the other to choose sides therefore causing tremendous guilt. Most of these children have problems with peers, out-of-control behaviors and perform poorly in school. The case manager can actually meet with them, gain their trust and help them through these difficult times. The case manager also mediates issues that would generally land the parents in Court fighting over issues that only cause the children more harm.

Each parent is ordered to participate with the case manager and follow not only the Court orders but also the case plan. They are ordered to attend a conflict resolution/co-parenting class original to the STEP Program to help them mediate between themselves and move forward to a more peaceful existence for their child. A co-parenting coach is available to families near the end of the program to help them through any problems that may arise. This coach is one of the facilitators of the conflict resolution/co-parenting class so they help the parents use the skills they have learned while in the STEP Program to bring about a resolution to the conflict before it escalates and lands them back in Court.

SERVICE INTEGRATION AND COLLABORATION:

The STEP Program has been a bridge between Health and Human Services; the case manager is aware of referrals coming from the ACCESS unit involving custody and visitation disputes. STEP helps this agency by giving them knowledge of court dates, court orders and mediation and evaluation reports done by the Court in relationship to the allegations parents call in against each other. These allegations are in response to change of custody or one parent trying to get the child from the other parent.

This collaboration between STEP and HHS has reduced the amount of time ACCESS supervisors and workers need to spend investigating referrals that are already being dealt with in the Family Law Court. By having the case manager an experienced social worker, severe emotional or other abuse can be handled through CPS immediately. This has reduced the ongoing emotional abuse to the child and allows for families to get the help they need without delay. Years of ongoing litigation and confusion are eliminated and emotional harm to the child is minimized.

The STEP Program case manager refers adults to the Adult System of Care for mental health needs and directs families toward services with Healthy Families, Family Support, Victim Witness, Peace for Families, Family Cooperative Project and various other programs. The case manager is also available to give information to peace officers when parents call them in regards to custody issues and has been involved with the DA's office abduction unit to expedite the return of children not returned to the primary parent. The case manager also works closely with the therapist's assigned to the families to ensure that the children are not being interviewed over and over regarding old information or matters that have already been handled by the Court.

The STEP Program helps parents move away from their negative feelings toward each other and towards a child-centered approach that benefits the child and reduces the ongoing conflict and emotional harm. Divorce is hard enough on kids, under five and otherwise, and they don't need the conflict and confusion to go on for so many years that they are emotionally damaged for life.